

## Civil War Book Review

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Fall 2011

Article 41

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### Moments of Despair: Suicide, Divorce, & Debt in Civil War Era North Carolina

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#### Recommended Citation

Marten, James (2011) "Moments of Despair: Suicide, Divorce, & Debt in Civil War Era North Carolina," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 13 : Iss. 4 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.13.4.19

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol13/iss4/41>

## Review

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**Silkenat, David** *Moments of Despair: Suicide, Divorce, & Debt in Civil War Era North Carolina*. University of North Carolina Press, \$45.00 ISBN 978-0-8078-3460-2

### Understanding Social Change and Continuity

Historians have from time to time interested themselves in the extent to which the Civil War fired a crucible of change in the South or, on the other hand, led to remarkable continuities. Political and economic historians often found more similarities than differences between antebellum and post-war landownership and office holding in the former Confederacy, social historians argued over the extent to which southern women were or were not empowered by the demands made on them by the war, and historians of race relations found evidence to support both continuity and change in the lives of freedpeople.

David Silkenat takes a very different tack in tracing the changes that the Civil War wrought in southern society. He argues that the bundles of values that shaped attitudes about suicide, divorce, and debt were affected by the seismic shifts in relationships between creditors and debtors, husbands and wives, and Christians and their God, and that these changes “shed light on the complex story of community change over the course of the nineteenth century” (218).

For whites, the forces unleashed by the war had begun to unravel the ties that bound their communities. On the other hand, black communities and families were strengthened by the outcome of the war, as families were reunified, marriages renewed, and property rights were confirmed. Combined with the economic and demographic effects of the war, these shifting moral assumptions meant that the superficially private matters in the book’s title became “moral barometers” of southern communities that reflected a shift from community responsibility to individualism (2). Although Silkenat believes that the changes he describes occurred throughout the United States—indeed, he

prominently features two different federal bankruptcy laws—he argues that they happened more abruptly and were shaped by race much more in the South than in the rest of the country.

*Moments of Despair* offers fairly nuanced analyses of these transformations. But the over-simplified summaries will have to suffice for the purposes of this review. For antebellum whites, debt was a social relationship conducted within a complicated etiquette of obligation and character, suicide was a horrible tragedy nearly incomprehensible to survivors, and divorce was a failure of a married couple to sustain community standards. Following the war, debt became a business proposition, suicide became the unhappy result of mental illness or outside forces, and divorce became yet another way in which the needs of the individual transcended the needs of the community. For antebellum African Americans, most of whom were enslaved, debt was virtually a moot point prior to the war, while marriage (although recognized as a vital part of slave society) was rarely stable and often threatened by conditions beyond their control, and suicide was seen as an acceptable, if extreme, way to resist bondage. After emancipation, blacks' determination to build stable communities and lives, as well as their commitment to fairly conservative Christian values, cast divorce and suicide as irresponsible and rarely considered options, making the successful repayment of debt a vital component of free respectability.

Whites saw in the changing frequency of and attitudes toward these sad occurrences a deterioration of community values and bonds, while African Americans saw them as a sign of increasing stability. While blacks responded to the post-war world by trying to capture the respectability and moral high ground that suicide (which they considered to be a "white" phenomenon), bankruptcy, and divorce undermined, whites accepted that previous standards might not apply to the war-damaged foundations of southern society.

There is a lot to like about this book, not the least of which is the author's use of extraordinarily apt anecdotes. Each section begins with an extended narrative on a particular person's encounter with debt, divorce, or suicide. And much of what Silkenat accomplishes stems from a creative application of sources, including a wonderful section on boardinghouses as a way for women to carve out a little independence and to manage debt and a tantalizing but too-brief passage on pawn shops. Silkenat is patient with his sources, teasing out personal perceptions and attitudes shrewdly and objectively.

Unfortunately, we learn much more about the interior lives of white than of black North Carolinians, which is one of the nagging problems in the book. As Silkenat freely admits, his evidence base is racially asymmetrical. There is simply no way to trace the race of divorcing couples in the existing documents, and the kinds of evidence he uses to explore notions of marriage among antebellum whites and blacks are very different. Most suicides reported in newspapers were committed by elite whites; we have no way of knowing how many poor whites and African Americans who took their own lives were simply ignored in the available sources. Silkenat makes great use of the ledgers of white-owned general stores, but has no equivalent source for black general stores. More broadly, it is frustratingly difficult to attach specific motives to individuals, at least not a large or random sample of people. Finally, although Confederate veterans enter the book as examples of ways in which mental illness (in their case, post-traumatic stress) could help survivors understand the suicides of loved ones and neighbors—indeed, the cover is graced with Henry Mosler’s evocative *The Lost Cause*, the well-known painting of a ragged, despairing Confederate soldier slumping against his battered rifle beside a ruined and abandoned farm shack—much more could be said about the ways in which the stress of combat, enemy occupation, refugeeing (for whites and blacks alike), and other war-time experiences could relate very directly to behavior and attitudes. None of these lacunae necessarily render Silkenat’s arguments invalid, but they suggest that some of his interpretations—especially of African American beliefs—are more speculative than rooted in solid evidence.

Silkenat ends the book with an uncommonly poignant quote from a Confederate soldier who, despite having no way of knowing how the war would upset the South he loved, nevertheless wrote nervously that “one does not know what to believe, or what to think. Things have all got into a sort of whirlwind, and are whirling and kicking & jumping around at such a rate, that half the time, a man hardly knows whether he is standing on his head or feet” (219). *Moments of Despair* provides often moving evidence of just how transformational those changes would be.

*James Marten is professor and chair of the History Department at Marquette University. Among his books are The Children’s Civil War; Civil War America: Voices from the Home Front; and Sing Not War: The Lives of Union and Confederate Veterans in Gilded Age America.*